

After some experimental work in New York ("The Story of a Potter" and "The Twenty-four Dollar Island") and an unsuccessful collaboration with the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer company which he cut short ("White Shadows in the South Seas"), he began work in 1929 on "Tabu" with the German director, F. W. Murnau. This collaboration again failed due to the conflict of ideas held by the two artists; the resulting film was not Flaherty's full conception. In 1931, having waited in vain in Berlin for permission to make a film in the U.S.S.R., he was invited to London by John Grierson, head of the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, which was creating a documentary film movement in Great Britain. In the short film, "Industrial Britain", which resulted, Flaherty's sequences on craftsmanship were notable.

Sir Michael Balcon, of the Gaumont-British Corporation, then commissioned Flaherty to make a film on one of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, a location about which Flaherty had heard on his trip to Europe. For nearly two years, with his wife, a young English assistant named John Taylor, and later his brother David Flaherty and a film editor from the London studios, John Goldman, Flaherty lived on Inishmore. The resulting film, "Man of Aran", was awarded first prize at the Venice Film Festival (1934) and was in the now well-established Flaherty tradition. Between 1935 and 1937, at Sir Alexander Korda's invitation Flaherty and his team worked on an adaptation of Kipling's "Jungle Book" story, "Toomai of the Elephants", but "Elephant Boy", as the film was called, because of its studio scenes made in England by another hand, is not a wholly representative Flaherty film.

In 1939, at the invitation of Pare Lorentz, who had produced the American documentary films "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and "The River", Flaherty returned to the United States to make a film on soil erosion and agricultural displacement. This film, "The Land" (1941), made in conjunction with the United States Department of Agriculture, though it contained some of Flaherty's finest sequences, was withdrawn from circulation due to changes in policy as a result of America's entry into World War II.

Between 1946 and 1948, at the request of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, Flaherty made "Louisiana Story", which revealed the impact of the machine age on the Cajun natives, especially on a 13-year-old boy. It won recognition at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1948, and received the British Film Academy's award for the best documentary film of that year.

Flaherty died July 23rd, 1951, at his home in Dummerston, Vermont, survived by his wife, Frances J. Hubbard (whom he married in 1914), and three daughters. Frances Flaherty accompanied her husband on most of his journeys, and her books, "Samoa" and "Elephant Dance", provide an admirable background to the making of his films.

The Robert Flaherty Foundation was set up in 1953 to perpetuate his name and his way of making films and to preserve his films for future generations. His books included "My Eskimo Friends (1924), "The Captain's Chair" (1938), and "White Master" 1939). He was given an honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts by the University of Michigan in 1950.

Flaherty, like all good craftsmen, worked with a minimum of equipment. He used his camera and celluloid as a painter his brush or a sculptor his clay. His warm, generous and sensitive approach to people -- islanders in the South Seas or workmen in the industrial Midlands -- suffused all his films and made him beloved. In thirty years, he made only four films he truly called his own, but his influence on documentary film-making made itself felt all over the world. A robust, fine-looking man, with the brightest of blue eyes, he was a great recounter of stories, some of which were recorded by the BBC in London. He observed the subjects of his films at first-hand, slowly and patiently. His stories arose from the people themselves and their environment. For these reasons, and because of his honesty of purpose and love for mankind, Flaherty's films stand the test of time more so than those of any other film-maker.

(The Times, London, July 25, 1951; Current Biography, March, 1949; International Motion Picture Almanac, 1948; Who's Who, 1949; Richard Griffith, The World of Robert Flaherty, 1953; Rotha, Griffith and Read, Documentary Film 1952; Rotha and Griffith, The Film Till Now, 1949; private information; personal knowledge).

Paul Rotha